

Is Thinking Behaviour?

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Following a post that emphasized proactivity in learning in the light of behaviourism, it left me stunned in my chair, asking myself, “Why wouldn’t thinking alone be classified as behaviour?”

Following the general Oxford Dictionary definition, behaviour describes a manner of conduct. The term usually appears to imply a visible change from the standpoint of an observer. While thoughts do appear to arise randomly by associating prior conditioning, directing one’s attention towards those thoughts does appear as a proactive process (thinking). If a person may have thinking habits, conscious thinking may count as behaviour.

Behaviourist vs. Constructivist Thinking

Skinner (1957) asserts speech as Verbal Behaviour, but generally conceptualizes that behaviour “alters the environment through mechanical action”. (p. 34). Skinner would arguably not classify thinking as a behaviour that produces changes in the environment “mind”. He further characterizes ideas as something one has or has not, an internal asset rather than something that must be constructed by mental effort. The ability, in Skinner’s view, lies in putting ideas to words and thus vocalizing them, whereas an idea is “what passes through the speaker’s mind, what he sees and hears and feels” (ibid., p. 39). Skinner thus classifies ideas as perceptions. As a crutch, Skinner adds, “we evidently construct the ideas at will from the behaviour to be explained.” (ibid., p. 39).

Thus, external behaviour, or will to external behaviour, for Skinner precedes the thinking process. In the following paragraphs, Skinner continues to refute the “doctrine of ideas” by typical authoritarian arguments. Whereas Skinner conforms with the constructivists that ideas do not have an independent existence, he attributes them to the speaker, not the thinker.

This type of thinking has been (hilariously) debunked by French philosopher Derrida, who coined the French term *differance*. Apparently being a spelling error, the mind can differ between the homonyms *differance* and *difference*, even assign a different meaning to *differance*, whereas the verbal behaviour assigned to both remains the same. In turn, *differance* for Derrida stands for a behaviourism-refuting continuous process of elaboration of ideas by differentiation, the “production of differing” that fundamentally drives all cognition (cf. Derrida, 1967/1997, p. 23). Not surprising, Derrida was an influential phenomenologist thinker who also coined the concept of deconstruction.

Conclusion

Much of teaching (and, as a negative example, indoctrination) does not target the way people act out, but primarily tries to alter the way in which people think. Behaviourism’s methods try to change how people behave, independent from what they may think. There must be more to ideas than being the (even transient) contents of an internal storehouse. This assumption lies at the base of constructivist thinking. Both Piaget and Vygotsky see thinking patterns or epistemologies as something that is the result of an active, constructive process. Heinz von Foerster, an influential constructivist who introduced the concept of second order cybernetics, noted that human forgetting more closely resembles physics’ law of decay than emptying a storehouse. Thus, he set the stage for a mathematical theory of constructive memory (cf. Rieger, 2005). Rieger concludes that by the design of psychological studies, people are “*treated as memory devices*”, reducing their complexity to input-output machines, rather than honouring their real complexity (ibid., p. 92, his emphasis).

References

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